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Dance of Dreams

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Michael Creger for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture were presented June 5, 1995, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Michael Creger for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture presented June 5, 1995.

Title: Dance of Dreams

It seems that the world does not exist in the way that we perceive it. Among the reasons for this are both the inaccuracy of the information gathered by our senses, and the cultural and linguistic structures through which we interpret this sensory information. This thesis and this group of sculptures, exhibited in the Autzen Gallery April 17 - May 10, 1995, are an attempt to address these issues and to point in a direction which may lead to greater understanding of the world and our place within it. Using primarily welded steel, and building from a foundation based on simple geometric forms, and making reference to more mystical, less reasoned cultural views, I have created sculpture that attempts to strike a balance between science and superstition, with a blending of rational and intuitive expression.

DANCE OF DREAMS

by

MICHAEL CREGER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
ART: SCULPTURE

Portland State University
1995

I begin with the premise that the world we perceive and our existence in it are not the reality we normally assume them to be, and I have worked to create sculpture that points toward the possibility of existence beyond our normal perceptions. We know that our senses are limited. We cannot see into the ultra-violet or infra-red spectrums of light without specialized equipment. We can hear only a narrow band of sound frequencies. Our senses of smell and taste are quite limited when compared to some other animals. Even our sense of touch seems to not be heightened to its fullest potential. Blind people are sometimes able to develop the sense of touch to a much greater degree than we ordinarily think is possible, in some cases, perhaps to the point of discerning color by touch. We as human beings do not achieve the potential that our existence presents to us. We do not really know where the boundaries of this potential lie, and our culture does not give us the tools for exploring them. We limit ourselves by our investment in a particular belief system.

Our western scientific tradition has broadened our view of the universe and given us a great deal of information about this physical world in which we find ourselves. At the same time, science has narrowed our cosmological view by stigmatizing and ridiculing as "superstitious" any occurrence or belief which the rational mind cannot grasp and explain. We have packaged our mysteries and institutionalized our spirit. I feel this is a dangerously narrow view. I feel that we need to maintain a balance between rational, scientific thought, and more intuitive, less reasonable/reasoned, but no less *real*, points of view. With my sculpture I make references to human traditions and cosmologies dealing with that which is beyond ourselves, beyond the visible, beyond the physical, graspable world which surrounds us. This might be seen

as mystical or spiritual thought. I feel it is simply a part of the human experience which has been ignored in our pursuit of the rational. I reclaim the superstitious and revel in its grace. The "truth" is not what we see. It is not what we believe. It is not what we dream. The truth is all that is possible. All that can be conceived. All that may be imagined, *and all that is beyond even this.*

I am encouraged by the idea that this western scientific tradition, which has been so strongly focused upon the weight and measure of this physical world, seems to be leading our understanding of reality toward a more metaphysical view, similar to that of eastern mystical traditions. Atomic and quantum physics tell us that solid objects are, in fact, not composed of solid matter.¹ Einstein showed that time is not constant, but speeds up and slows down under certain conditions. Time and space become inseparable. Stephen Hawking has presented black-hole theories that deal with the relationships between the past, present, and future.² These have the potential to break apart the very foundations of our scientific method. Dr. Raymond Moody has created situations which produce apparitions of the dead.³ Psychiatrists are producing evidence of reincarnation and using techniques of past life therapy in their practices.⁴ These people are dealing with issues that go beyond our conventional understanding of the experiential world in which we live.

Using primarily welded steel, I have created a group of sculptures for my MFA thesis show which has been presented in the Autzen Gallery from April 17, through May 10, 1995 (Fig. 1). One of the prominent features of these sculptures is the texture. When I began the graduate program at

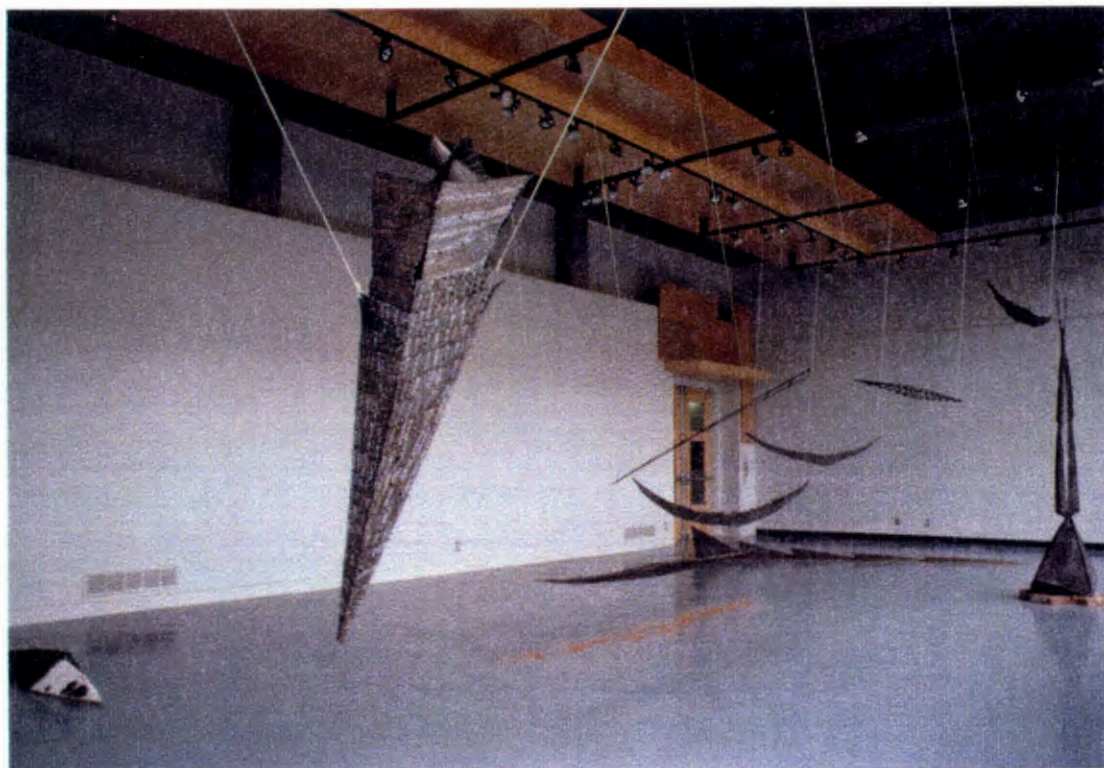


Fig. 1 Instalation view

Portland State, I was using very smooth, clean surfaces. The welds were ground down to be nearly invisible and every aspect was kept under a very tight control. There was very little opportunity for intuitive changes after the work had begun. The rougher welded texture that I have used on this body of thesis work has allowed me to let go of some of that control, to encourage a more intuitive and responsive method of working. I see this as a welcomed change and an example of extending beyond the controlled and mathematical structure of my work toward something less graspable, less understandable in terms of reason and logic: A shift from the primary toward the primal. In order to produce these textures I have encouraged accidental imperfections. I have set the welder improperly to allow impurities into the weld. I have even used a stool with uneven legs which rocks back and forth while I am welding in order to force myself to release control and allow the effects of induced instability. At the same time I maintain an awareness of the results of these actions and use different techniques for variations in the texture. I also make careful judgments about what works and what does not, what to keep and what to rework.

The piece titled REDPATH II (Fig. 2) deals with issues of our journey through life, the path that we walk. In some Native American cultures there is a tradition of the good red road, or the path with heart. This speaks of the obstacles we encounter and decisions we make as we travel through life, with encouragement to seek our highest truth and highest self. This piece is composed of five modified tetrahedron shapes forming a fifteen foot line along the floor. The tetrahedron is a triangular pyramid with four triangular sides. It is a primary form having the smallest number of sides of any flat

sided volume. A triangle is also a primary form, having the smallest number of sides of any straight sided geometric shape. The dimensions of the tetrahedrons in REDPATH II become progressively taller, and at the same time progressively shorter horizontally. For some time I have used mathematics as a tool, as a lever to pry open the doors to the creative process. Simple forms and geometric concepts become the starting point and the building blocks from which my sculptures are made. Using rhythmic repetition of lines, forms, and textures, using progressions of arrangements and relationships, I create sculptures which refer not only to themselves, but to concepts of existence beyond themselves. These repetitions and progressions establish patterns which suggest continuation. These rhythms could conceivably continue repeating indefinitely, beyond the physical object itself and conceptually beyond the physical world and into a non-physical or metaphysical existence.

The rough surface of REDPATH II refers to obstacles that we face. The junctions where one segment joins the next represent those points where one part of our life ends and we must make a leap of faith in order to continue. In my own life, I would say that my decision to quit my job six years ago and move to Portland in order to attend Pacific Northwest College of Art was one of these junctures. This time at the end of my involvement with the MFA program will undoubtedly become another. The way these sculptural segments connect also refers to growth in the way that one plant segment grows out from the one before it. Around the edges of this piece I have sprinkled red clay powder with a very high iron content. Although these two materials are very different, there is a relationship between the iron oxide in

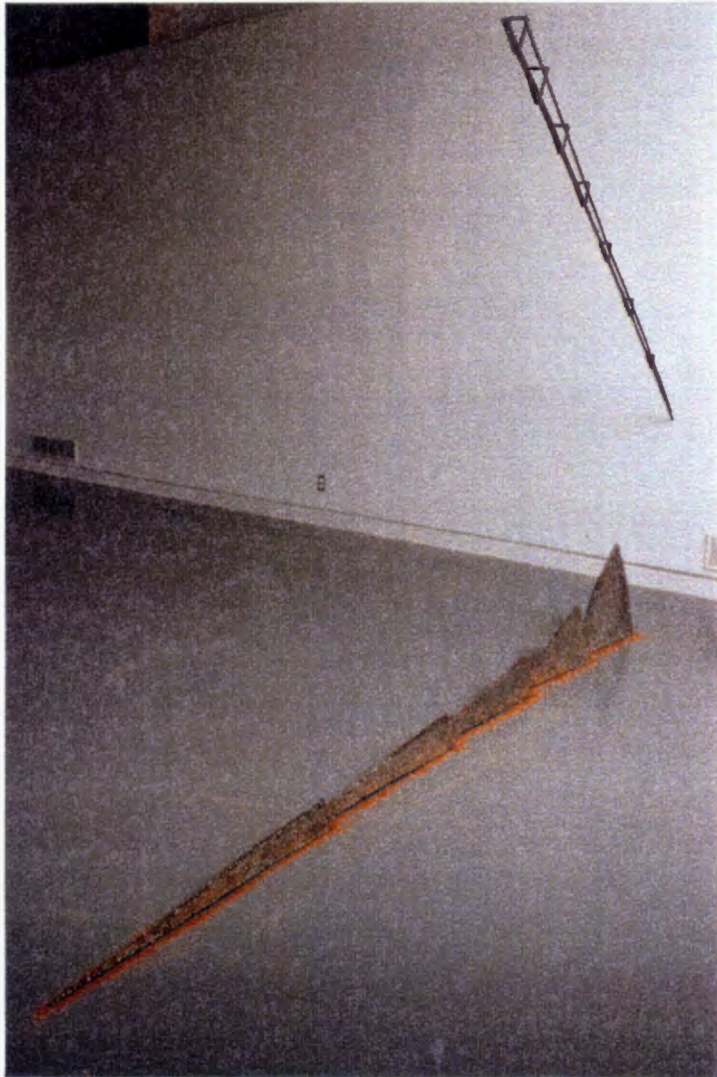


Fig. 2 REDPATH II (on floor)
UNTITLED (suspended above)

the clay and the rust that is beginning to form on the steel. I use the clay powder as a reference to the earth, to the ground from which it comes. It is also a less refined, more primal form of the iron used to make the steel from which these sculptures are created.

REDPATH II relates to the untitled piece that is suspended above it (Fig. 2). Although I think of these as two separate sculptures, they certainly refer to each other. The untitled piece is an open tetrahedron formed of steel rods and surfaced with a rough, welded texture. It hangs from the ceiling with the long pointed end connected to the wall. The form is divided into seven sections which get progressively shorter as they get farther from the wall. Traditionally, the relationship between sculpture and the floor has been important in establishing where it exists in the world. Suspending sculpture from the ceiling as I have done in several of these thesis works, sets up a different kind of relationship between the sculpture, the floor, and the ceiling. Even though they are obviously suspended with wire or cable, these sculptures seem to have a floating quality which refers to a more ethereal form of existence. This untitled piece also contacts the wall in a tense and tenuous way lending a fragile uncertainty to its placement in the room and in the world. In this thesis exhibition I have utilized a variety of methods of establishing connections and relationships between the sculptures, the walls, the ceiling, and the floor.

As a reference to a more traditional placement of sculpture, I made DANCE (Fig. 3) a freestanding piece. Although I originally intended it to stand directly on the floor, when I placed it in the gallery its interaction with the gray painted concrete floor and some other elements in the space were not

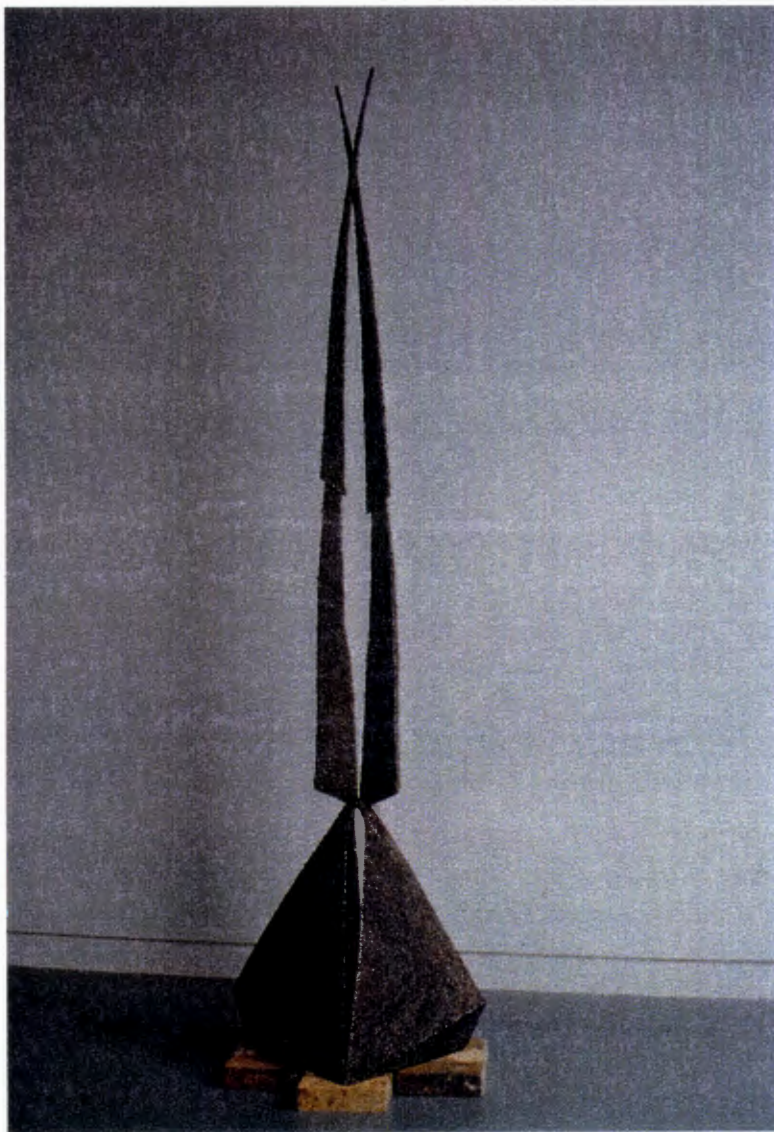


Fig.3 DANCE

working visually. It seemed too heavily anchored to the floor. I decided to raise it up onto a layer of firebrick. This breaks the problematic interaction between the piece and the floor. It removes the sculpture from the floor and the space that the viewer occupies. One step removed from the world of our existence. The ceramic material of the brick makes a subtle connection to the red clay powder used in some other pieces. The color of the brick also relates to the color of the wooden strip along the bottom of the windows and tends to lift the piece visually. In this sculpture, I was interested in the relationship between the two tall, thin, tetrahedron shaped elements. These forms rise with a slight twist, coming close and almost touching near the top. This gesture has always reminded me of an embrace, and this is the thought behind the title. The negative space between these two shapes is also very important for me. It has a peculiar figural reference with a suggestion of waist and hips, which becomes more powerful and intriguing to me as I spend time with the piece. The welded texture in the lower portion creates a spiraling, circular pattern in contrast to the linear treatment used in the upper part. This pattern, which resembles the spirals of a thumbprint or the growth rings of a tree, becomes something of a visual focus, balancing the interesting interplay of the upper forms.

In the piece titled BOAT DREAMING (Fig. 4), there are seven boat like shapes suspended from the ceiling. They range in length from 9.5 to 3.5 feet, and become progressively smaller as they get higher off the floor. The lowest is about eighteen inches from the floor and the highest is about nine feet. These boat shapes make reference to vessels and vehicles for journeying. In *The Way of the Shaman*, Michael Harner tells of shamanic cultures where a

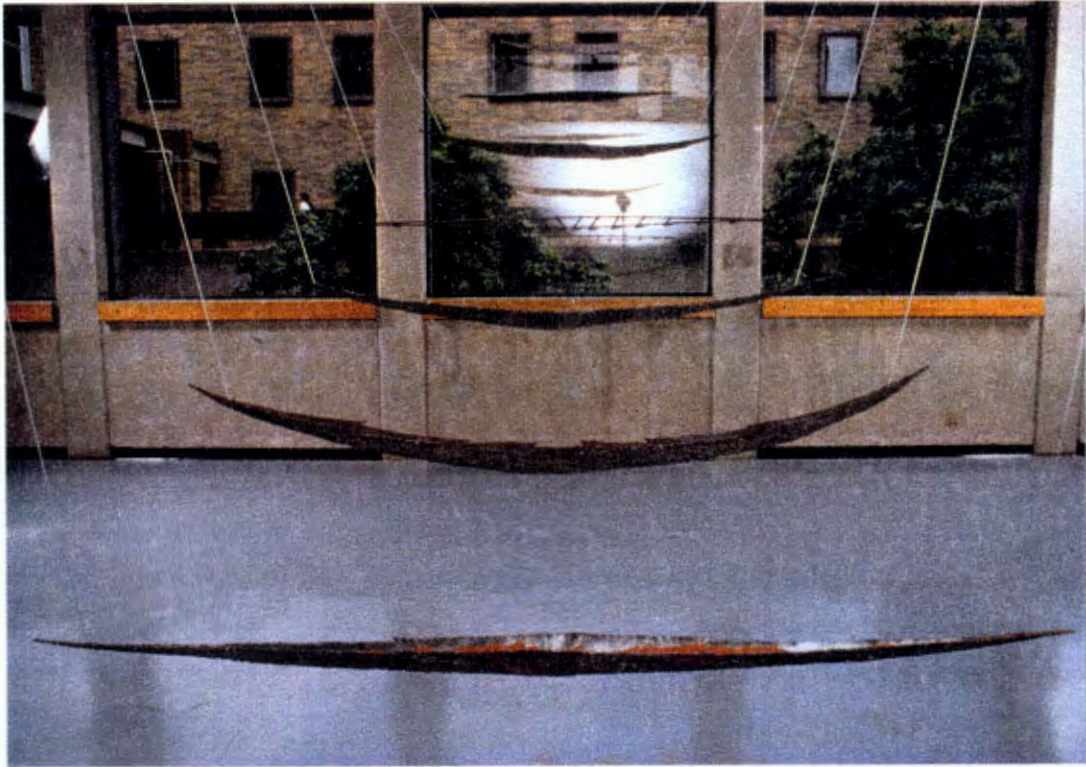


Fig. 4 BOAT DREAMING

boat like structure is created in which the shaman makes the journey into non-ordinary reality.⁵ I refer to these shamanic or indigenous cultures and traditions which are not so closely tied to reason as our own scientific tradition. Primitive, pre-industrial, pre-literate, all of these are condescending labels we create to refer to cultures and systems of thought which are different, and by implication inferior to our own. The assumption is that these cultures have not yet, but eventually will progress to our own level of sophistication. I prefer the term non-literate, meaning without writing, and hope to eliminate any connotation of inferiority or lack of sophistication.⁶ Most non-literate, tribal cultures have some sort of shamanic tradition, and I feel that there is much that we could learn from these traditions.

With this piece I am also dealing with levels of awareness. The seven boats might be seen as seven levels of consciousness, or perhaps relating to the seven primary chakras. The center boat is suspended at my eye level and refers to our ordinary level of consciousness. This is where we perceive our physical existence. By making this boat skeletal in structure, and not enclosed, I hope to make the point that our normal view of the world is not as real, nor as solid as we tend to believe. On the sides of the other six boats, three above and three below, I have written a transliteration of English words using the runic futhark (alphabet). I have used the runic language as a reference to theories about our experience being mediated and molded by language and culture. Naom Chomsky has proposed that our brains are hard wired for language and that it is an inherent part of our humanity.⁷ Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida present theories that linguistic structure precedes and mediates conscious awareness.⁸ Our language, which is informed and

molded by our culture, dictates how we interpret and edit all of the information that our senses gather from the world around us. It does not allow us to see the world as it *really* is. We can never experience reality from outside the structure of language.

I wanted to use some kind of linguistic reference, but did not want to be too direct and immediate. The runes which are not commonly understood, and which contain many different levels of meaning serve this purpose well. I like the fact that different people will bring different levels of understanding to these images. Runic is a pre-Germanic and pre-Anglo-Saxon language which dates from approximately the second century BC.⁹ It is one of the roots of my own language, and some of the characters resemble English letters both in form and phonetic value. Runic characters have traditionally had mystical meaning as well as common everyday usage. Today, runes are used as an oracle or divination tool and I am interested in including an acknowledgment of this mystical tradition. Reading from the central, skeletal boat toward the top, these runes read: Energy/Power, Magic/Spirit, and Om/Wyrd. Wyrd is the name of the blank rune stone and signifies the unknowable, the mystery. From the central boat down they read: Symbol/Sign, Question/Desire, and Journey/Dream. Into the bottom boat I have poured the same red clay powder that was used in REDPATH II. Some of this powder has filtered through holes in the boat and forms a visual connection with the floor.

I wanted to create a relationship between the wall and the floor with the piece titled NET(WORK) (Fig. 5). The two very similar forms are again based on the tetrahedron shape. They are divided into segments by cuts in the steel which nearly sever each section from the next. The form on the floor

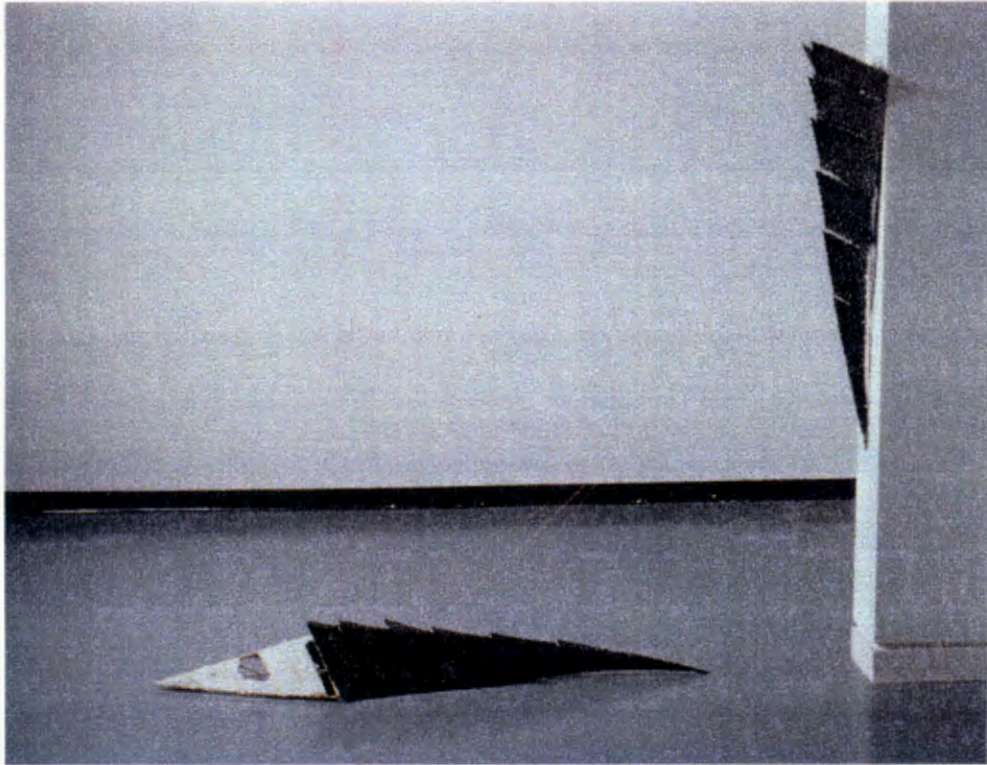


Fig. 5 NET(WORK)

has a more rigidly geometric appendage made from plaster with a steel rod structural framework showing through in places. This plaster is broken and decaying. Hanging this piece for the show presented several problems. After trying many arrangements, I felt the need to utilize this short wall that extends out into the gallery space. By attaching the upper form of NET(WORK) to the end of this wall, I was unable to include a part of this piece which had been drawn directly on the wall in earlier presentations. This element, drawn with charcoal, was a reflection of the plaster and steel appendage on the lower form. This created a dialogue between the three-dimensional, enclosed, decaying floor element and the upper, more ephemeral and eternal, two-dimensional element. That dialogue is not apparent in this presentation. I am still uncertain what the best solution might be, but I feel that the benefits of this placement, and the utilization of this peculiar element in the gallery space, outweigh the disadvantages. Very fine copper wires are stretched between the upper wall piece and the form on the floor. These create a crisscross pattern of net like connections between the upper and lower forms. These connections which could be made visually and conceptually without the wire, become physical and somehow more fragile and tenuous with the addition of this fine wire.

The earliest work in this exhibition is titled APPARITION (Fig. 6). It consists of two similar geometric, abstract forms, with the upper form rising out of the lower one in a way similar to the connections of the segments previously discussed in REDPATH II. Together these forms make reference to a torso which is suspended from the ceiling by two cables and hovers over the viewer, becoming a floating, mysterious presence. As the title implies, this

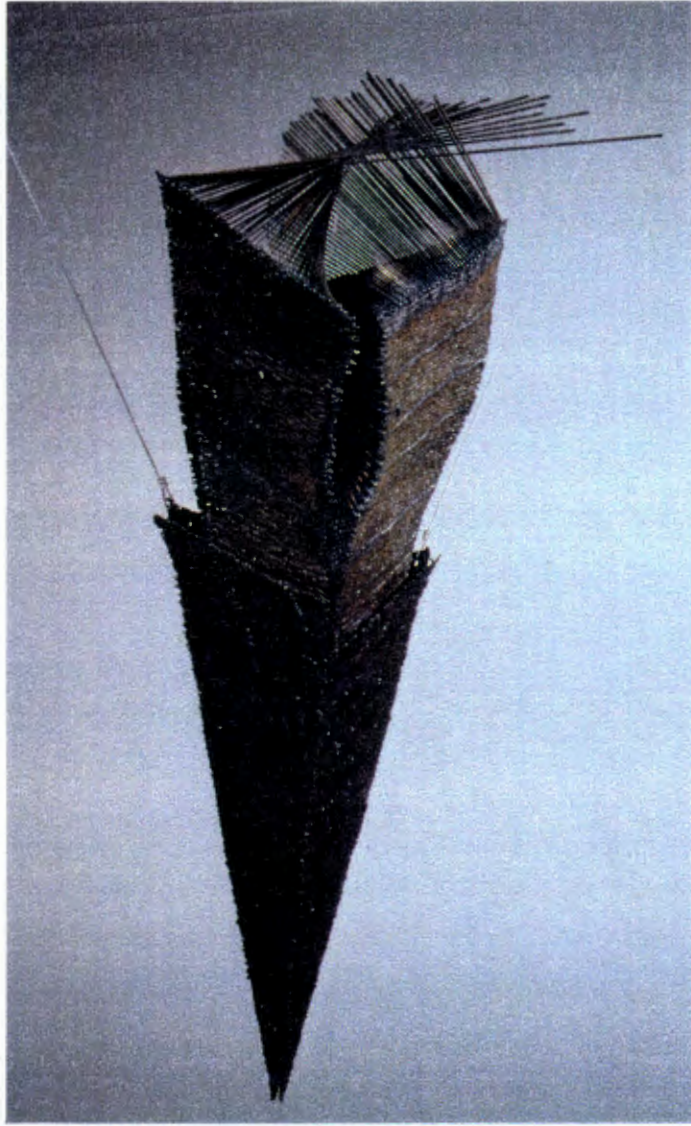


Fig.6 APPARITION

piece deals with the idea of establishing contact with those who have died. It seems that this experience is not at all uncommon. In his book *Reunions*, Dr. Raymond Moody speaks of studies in which "as many as 66 percent of widows experience apparitions of their departed husbands." And again, "as many as 75 percent of parents who lose a child . . . will have some kind of apparition of that child."¹⁰ It seems that people are reluctant to discuss these experiences for fear of being ridiculed or labeled crazy. It is unfortunate that our cultural training keeps us from understanding and exploring such a common and fascinating occurrence.

At eye level in this sculpture, is an opening into what would be the chest of the figure. This opening is lined with a series of copper colored rods which lead the viewer's attention into the interior of the piece and seem to glow with reflected light. These rods relate to another series of interlocking rods, which form a fan-like structure at the top of the piece, and establish a repetitive pattern which I feel suggests continuation beyond the form itself. A pattern of rhythmic repetition is also formed by the welded texture used on this and most of the other sculptures in this exhibition.

Through this body of work I have made reference to both the rational and the mystical. I have tried to create a blend of science and superstition. I feel that my own progress over the past two years in this graduate program has, in some ways, paralleled what I see beginning to happen in our cultural world view. I began with a very tightly controlled, logical, and mathematical approach to making sculpture. Through experimentation and discovery I have developed a looser, more intuitive and responsive method of working which allows more than, but does not reject, logic and reason. The sculptures I have

created make reference to the value of, and the need for, making a similar shift in our cultural paradigm by allowing more than the logic of the scientific method. By learning from traditions with less reasoned viewpoints we may broaden our understanding of our own existence, and develop a more complete world view.

Notes

1. The concepts of quantum physics are discussed by Fritjof Capra in *The Tao of Physics*.
2. Folger, pp. 98-106.
3. Dr. moody describes his methods and the history behind them in his book *Reunions*.
4. These procedures are discussed by Dr. Brian Weiss in his books *Many Lives, Many Masters*, and *Through Time Into Healing*.
5. Harner, pp. 90-92.
6. These sentiments have been expressed by Levi-Strauss in *Myth and Meaning*, p. 15.
7. I was introduced to Naom Chomsky's ideas about language and the brain through a program about the brain which was broadcast on PBS Television.
8. Sarup, pp. 12, 18, 37.
9. Page, p.6.
10. Moody, Introduction, p. x.

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